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ABSTRACT

In traditional American Indian cultures, sex roles were clearly defined and women were the keepers of the home, child bearers, and food gathers. Sometimes, however, stereotypes and preconceptions become barriers to cross-cultural communication. For instance, feminists who see themselves as victims of a male-dominated society cannot assume that Indian societies are male-dominated in the same way as their own nor that the system of rewards for being a wife and mother is the same in Indian society as in the dominant society. In one survey, 61 Indian women college students indicated a wide latitude in their knowledge of or definition of women's roles in their tribal cultures. The factors involved in a sense of cultural/sexual identity for Indian women may include language differences, participation in tribal ceremonies, residence on a reservation, or attendance at week-end pow-wows. Within their own communities these strategies are generally associated with the respect for the role of wife and mother that persists in Indian communities. For college and professional Indian women, communication strategies may be those of trying to inform people about Indian values or traditions and of helping break stereotypes. (TJ)

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AMERICAN INDIAN WOMEN: PROBLEMS OF COMMUNICATING A CULTURAL/SEXUAL IDENTITY

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In an article published in 1901, Joseph Gilfillan, an Episcopalian missionary in Minnesota, described the Ojibwe Indian male and female. The male was tall and graceful, bounding through the forest unburdened except for his bow and arrow. The Ojibwe female was short, and rotund, plodding along bearing a tremendous burden on her back. Gilfillan attributed the squat and rotund stature of the woman to the fact that generations of Ojibwe women had born such burdens, and is some evolutionary sense they seem to have been squashed down by them.[1]

The stereotype of the woman in traditional Indian cultures has generally been that of the patient squaw, trudging silently behind her man. Much of the stereotype of Indian woman has persisted in modern society. She is still often viewed as a passive individual, confined to the role of wife and mother. Indian women do indeed fulfill the traditional child bearing role--in 1970 Indian women had the highest rate of natural increase of any population subgroup in the United States, three percent per year. The birth rate was 155 births per 1,000 Indian women ages 15-44 (for nonwhites and whites the rates were 114 and 84 per 1,000 respectively).[2] The Indian family has more children and a lower income than any other group. For Indian women, the median income per year in 1970 was $1,697. That of all U.S. women was $2,404. That of all U.S. men was $6,614.

Much of the role of Indian women today is influenced by poverty, which is more a result of her status as an Indian rather than her status as a woman.

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But within Indian societies, women's roles are also to a large degree defined on the basis of cultural expectations that differ from those of modern American society. In traditional American Indian cultures, which, it must be pointed out, were non-technological and based directly on human labor for production of food and material goods, the roles of men and women were considered to be complementary. Sex roles were clearly defined in terms of women as keepers of the home, child bearers, and food gatherers, and men were hunters and protectors of the home. Agricultural societies generally tended to be matrilineal because farming was women's work (except in the Pueblos, where men and women either shared the labor or men farmed exclusively). Where women controlled the major source of food supply, they generally also controlled the inheritance of personal property and owned the family dwelling as well. In hunting and gathering societies, the man's role was generally the most important in terms of public acknowledgement or display of personal qualities of bravery and honor, but women, as keepers of the home, exercised considerable influence in their own domain. Although a woman's marriage was arranged by her male relatives, once married she generally could exercise a great deal of freedom in her future. Mountain Wolf Woman, a Menominee girl, was told by her mother, who was preparing her for marriage to a man she disliked, that she must do what her brothers wanted her to do or else she would disgrace them. However, her mother added, "When you are older and know better, you can marry whomever you yourself think that you want to marry."[4] And indeed that is what Mountain Wolf Woman did.

The processes of acculturation that have accompanied contact between Indian and non-Indian societies have greatly undermined the integrity of

Indian societies. Processes of education and Christianization have already destroyed much of the traditional life ways of Indian societies, but there is a persistence of Indian identity in America that cannot be denied. In the 1970 census 763,594 people identified themselves as American Indians. Of those, 388,210 were female.[5] The Bureau of Indian Affairs currently recognizes 481 Indian tribal entities.[6]

Anthropologists studying the impact of acculturation on American Indians have often concluded that acculturation has a less severe impact on Indian women than on Indian men because the roles of women as wives and mothers are less challenged than those of men who have been forced to give up their traditional hunter and warrior roles and to compete rather in a wage based economy.[7] Indian women do indeed continue to play important roles in their communities as wives and mothers, and yet because the women's liberation movement in modern American society has generally portrayed those roles as confining and unrewarding, many women who associate themselves with some sense of desiring to be liberated from those roles also see women who fulfill those roles as being confined and unfulfilled. It is at this point that stereotypes and preconceptions become barriers to cross-cultural communication. If feminists see themselves as the victims of a male-dominated society, they cannot assume that American Indian societies are male dominated in the same way as their own. If they see the roles of wife and mother as being unrewarding, they cannot assume that the system of rewards of the Indian community is the same as that of the dominant society.

A former president of the University of Minnesota, delivering his final

commencement address to the student body of the University in 1974, stated that the women's liberation movement had brought about the most sweeping social changes of any movement in America in the last decade. It is obvious that any movement that makes basic changes in the relationships of males and females within a society is going to cause basic cultural changes--in patterns of child rearing behavior, in the structure of the family, in the economic patterns of the country. To assume that Indian women need or wish to be liberated from traditional family-based roles is to assume that Indian cultures should be changed to conform to majority expectations. How to communicate that this is not necessarily the case is a problem, especially when one confronts an audience of feminists. But perhaps it is too much of an assumption, indeed it is a form of stereotyping, to say that Indian women all share a common sense of identity and values, and that they will all react to the feminist movement as something opposed to Indian values. There is a wide range of variation in Indian cultures and historical experiences of Indian tribes. It is impossible to define a unique Indian identity, and Indian women are individuals within their own tribal groups.

In a questionnaire that I distributed recently in connection with a study on the status of Indian women in higher education, I asked the respondents to describe in their own words what they felt was the typical role of a woman in their own tribal culture. Of the 61 female Indian college students who responded to the questionnaire, 24 said that the woman was expected to be wife and mother and to take care of the home. Of those, however, several also commented that the woman was often forced to or expected to take a job in order to help the family financially. Ten felt that men and women were

equal, and several of those commented that each individual was expected to do his or her best. Other responses were varied. Two women commented on the fact that they came from tribes which had a matrilineal tradition where women played very important roles. Five said that they acted without reference to tribal culture. Twelve made no response at all or said they didn't know. The results of the survey indicated a wide latitude in women's knowledge of or definition of women's roles in their tribal culture. Thus, though a woman may strongly identify herself as being Indian, she may not identify herself with a particular role as an Indian woman. The survey was conducted among Indian women who were students in colleges or universities, certainly a non-typical group of Indian women (if any group of Indian women can be said to be "typical.") But I think the responses do indicate the variability in cultural/sexual identity that is possible. If there is one common factor among the women who I surveyed, it is that they are almost all in college with the intention of entering some kind of service profession, i.e., teaching, social work, health, guidance and counseling, and law. A number of the women indicated that their career would involve working with Indian people. If the fields of education, counseling and social work have traditionally in the academic world been entered by a large number of women, the Indian women do not seem to view them as options because women have traditionally entered them but because they are areas in which the women can serve Indian people.

A misconception that affects all minority women in professional areas is that the minority woman has an advantage in the job market over non minorities and even over minority group men. There is some evidence that for Indian woman, at least, a college education may be the key to greater opportunities than for

the white women. According to statistics derived from the 1970 census, 7.8 percent of all American women have had four or more years of college, and 16 percent of those who are employed are in professional or technical positions; only 2.5 percent of Indian women have had as much education but 11 percent of those women are employed in professional or technical positions.[8] However, in terms of overall participation in the labor market, the unemployment rate for Indian women in 1970 (10.2 percent) was twice as high as for all women; interestingly, though, the unemployment rate for Indian women nationally and in rural areas was lower than the unemployment rate for Indian men, a situation that did not exist for any other group in the population.[9] Thus it seems likely that the college educated Indian woman may indeed have a better chance to enter a profession than a college educated white woman. In the labor market generally, Indian women are more likely than Indian men to be employed; however, whether this last is a desirable situation is another question. If these statistics from 1970 are interpreted to mean that Indian women are more likely than Indian men to be hired, then perhaps the situation is an undesirable one in that women are being forced to leave their homes and enter the job market because they find it easier than their husbands to get jobs. The woman must thus assume the traditional role of wife and mother and support the family. Considering the high levels of unemployment generally for men and women, the low family incomes, and the high birth rate, the fact that Indian women are working is probably not a matter of liberation from a confining role at home but rather a matter of sheer necessity.

Communication strategies for Indian women are as varied as the women themselves. The factors involved in a sense of cultural/sexual identity may be language differences, participation in tribal ceremonials (such as female

puberty rites), residence on a reservation, or they may be identity with one's family and friends and attendance at week-end pow-wows in an urban area. There may be strong pressure to get married, and indeed, according to the 1970 census, Indians do marry earlier and have families earlier than the general population,[10] and their families are generally larger. On the other hand, many Indian women college students do not necessarily identify the role of wife and mother as the traditional woman's role in their tribal culture, and they feel free to make their career choices for themselves rather than with any reference to a typical Indian woman's role. The most important communication strategy for Indian women is that of displaying pride in one's identity and in performing with skill and competence the functions of one's role, be it wife and mother, lawyer, or teacher.

Indian women have their strategies of communication within their own communities, and those strategies are generally associated with the respect for the role of wife and mother that persists in Indian communities. Expectations are strong that the individual will marry, and although attitudes toward marriage and divorce may differ from those of the majority society in many cases, the extended family (several generations of the family living in close proximity to each other in a reservation community, or sometimes even in an urban area) still provides continuity in family life. In relation to the majority society the Indian woman who leaves the family to pursue a professional career or to seek a college degree often does so with the intention of preparing herself in some way to serve Indian communities. Her strategies of communication with the academic or professional community in which she moves may be those of trying to inform people about Indian values or traditions that may help to break the stereotypes of Indians that still persist in

textbooks and in the media. The very presence of competent and skilled Indian women in academic and professional settings is thus a strategy in itself.

A group of Indian women who are faculty members in colleges or universities or involved in professional programs was surveyed in connection with my study on the status of Native American women in higher education. Their reasons for seeking advanced degrees were varied, but all in one way or another indicated that they intend to help Indian students through college. Several mentioned that they tried to represent the concerns of Indian people to non-Indians. Two definitely felt that part of their impact was in the fact that, as one said, she was a role model of a competent and successful Indian woman, and as the other said, she was the only Indian woman that many people said they had ever known.

As varied as their experiences and their present lives are, the identities of the women I have interviewed and surveyed are shaped by the fact that they are Indian. Their studies, their work, and their concerns are in most cases related in some way to Indian students or Indian communities. They communicate a good deal of their identities in their choices of career and their commitments to Indian people.

NOTES

[1]Joseph G. Gilfillan, The Ojibwe in Minnesota, Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, IX (St. Paul, Minnesota: Published by the Society, 1901), p. 58.

[2]Sar A. Levitan and William B. Johnston, Indian Giving, Federal Programs for Native Americans (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 54-55.

[3]Office of Special Concerns, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Department of Health, Education and Welfare, A Study of Selected Socio-economic Characteristics of Ethnic Minorities Based on the 1970 Census, Vol. III: American Indians (HEW Publication No. (OS) 75-122, July, 1974), p. 59.

[4]Nancy Oestreich Lurie, ed., Mountain Wolf Woman, Sister of Crashing Thunder: The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1961), pp. 29-30.

[5]United States Bureau of the Census, Census of Population: 1970, Subject Reports, Final Report PC920-1F, American Indians (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office 1973), Table 1, page 1.

[6]United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, "You Asked About. . . Facts About American Indians and Alaskan Natives," (Mimeographed pamphlet, 1963), p. 1.

[7]See, for example, Louise S. Spindler, "Menominee Women and Culture Change," American Anthropological Association Memoir 91 (Menasha, Wisconsin: American Anthropological Association, 1962), p. 45.

[8]Office of Special Concerns, p. 56.

[9]Ibid., p. 53.

[10]Ibid., p. 45.